

AMHERST COUNCIL ON AGING MINUTES
February 7, 2008

Members Present: Daniel Clapp, Elsie Fetterman, Janet Gorth, Doris Holden, Rosemary Kofler, Stephanie O'Keeffe, Barbara Sutherland, David Yaukey

Select Board Liaison: Gerry Weiss

Staff Present: Nancy Pagano (Director/Program Director), Maura Plante (Assistant Director/Services), Karen Erman (Administrative Assistant), Giovanna Mix (Administrative Assistant for Programs), Lisa White (Director, Senior Health Services)

Guests: Marge Babb, Lillian Scott

Welcome:

Barbara Sutherland, Chair, called the Council on Aging meeting to order at 9:10 AM.

Minutes of Previous Meeting:

The minutes of the December 6, 2007 meeting were approved and accepted following the correction of a grammatical error.

Senior Trust Treasurer's Report:

Doris reported a balance of \$4,604.10 in the checking account. A separate checking account for Stay Put holds \$550.00. The total balance of the investments is \$90,996.30. The total donations to the Friends was \$5,305 of which \$1,337.69 was put in the Senior Trust account. The report was accepted and approved.

NEW BUSINESS

Tom McAuley's resignation:

Nancy announced that Tom McAuley recently moved to an assisted retirement facility in another community. He resigned from the COA, with regret.

Doris made a motion that the COA regretfully accept his resignation and express appreciation for all his work. The motion was passed.

Administrative Assistant for Programs:

Nancy welcomed **Giovanna Mix**, recently hired as Administrative Assistant for Programs. She will work 20 hours a week, mainly coordinating the student volunteers and helping Maura with the Meals on Wheels program.

Enhance Fitness Program:

Nancy announced that HVES received a grant from the Center for Disease Control to fund a pilot program in Northampton and Amherst for physical fitness, using weights. Classes, beginning March 17, will be held on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 4-5 PM. It is hoped that those hours will accommodate working baby boomers. The fee is \$1.00 per class. There will be an informational session on February 15 at 3PM.

Stephanie asked in what way *Enhance Fitness* would impact staff resources or time. Nancy replied that the Senior Center will only provide publicity but that the leader is from outside and much publicity is already provided. Our Senior Center will charge a \$2 registration fee.

CONTINUING BUSINESS

Budget Discussion:

Stephanie began by speaking about a document that was in our packets, entitled "Public Employees and Campaigns," because it had caused some confusion before the meeting began. She emphasized the point that employees and COA members may not help to solicit funds for candidates or put their name on anything that solicits funds. A name simply in support of a candidate is OK.

Stephanie reviewed the current budget scenario. The Finance Committee offered guidelines for a 2% budget increase to the Town, the Library, the Elementary Schools and a 3% increase to the Regional Schools. The Town Manager proposed a budget at 3.1% (about \$200,000 greater) stating that 'new' revenues coming in will support the difference. The Town budget is about \$18.5 million,

Library \$2.1 million, Elementary School 21.1 million, Regional School 12.7 million. The currently proposed FY09 budget is \$62,297,522.

The Elementary School budget came in at 8.4%. In order to reach the 2% guideline, that budget would have to be cut by \$1.25 million.

It is uncertain if the Finance Committee will allow the 3.1% budget proposal from TM. If they do not, \$200,000 will have to be cut. The Town Manager's budget included about \$250,000 in cuts to meet the proposed 2% guideline. That included a \$66,000 cut to Human Service agencies. The Select Board is committed to preserving the \$66,000 for Human Services. Therefore, if Larry has to restore that \$66,000, he will have to cut \$66,000 from elsewhere in the budget. Similarly, a \$55,000 restoration may be needed for the War Memorial Pool. If the 3.1% is not allowed, Larry's budget may be out of balance by more than \$300,000.

Stephanie announced a Town-wide budget forum at the Middle School on Monday, February 11 at 7 PM to discuss the budget priorities. The League of Women Voters will give a 30-minute presentation on Municipal Finances – how state revenues interact with Town money. She strongly encouraged all members to attend and tell friends.

Nancy said that Larry Shaffer talked about a "black hole" in the schools. They have not cut their budget sufficiently and it is not known where that money will come from. Nancy alluded to the handout with answers to Gerry Weiss' questions and concerns that people in Town are questioning 'why it is necessary for the Town to support the Senior Center'.

Gerry Weiss said that as the budget gets tighter, human services are the first to be cut. Since a "needs study" has never been done, we need to look at all of the human services and determine how to address all needs with limited dollars. Gerry thinks the elementary school budget will have to be readjusted. Their 'level service budget' (what it will cost to provide exactly what was provided last year) came in at 8.4%, which is really high. Schools are being badly funded by the state and federal government.

Regarding Larry Shaffer's budget of 3.1%, Gerry admits that the Finance Committee is not happy that it exceeds their guideline of 2%. If we put the entire town at an across the board budget of 3% we could manage, but that would put the elementary schools in a big hole. Salaries, benefits, step increases, health insurance, utilities are among the reasons for the elementary school increases. Jere Hochman has stated that he will not balance the budget on the backs of his faculty. All employees got a 1% increase last year. Starting July 1, 2008 there is no contract. At some point, lay offs may have to occur. Consolidation of administration in the schools is being considered. Larry Shaffer appointed a Blue Ribbon Task Force to look at how the schools and town are organized and whether money is being spent efficiently. That report will come out in a month or two.

Gerry believes that next year the budget situation will be much worse. The 'new revenues', which will help this year, will not see larger increases to meet next year's budget.

Nancy shared the most recent draft of a power point that she will present to the Finance Committee tonight and she asked COA members for input. Main points include:

- Although (as Gerry Weiss pointed out), Town census reports from 2007 are incomplete, initial figures suggest that the senior population may be diminishing. If it is true that seniors are now moving away from Amherst, it probably is because of the high cost of living. If the senior population decreases, our Formula Grant will go down. *Emmett Schmarsow, Program Director for COAs in the Dept. of Elder Affairs, says that in towns where elder numbers decrease, it is usually associated with diminished services.*
- Seniors bring taxes to the Town without costing the Town money for schools. Therefore, it benefits the Town to be attractive to seniors.
- There are many elders in Amherst who are at the poverty level and are struggling.
- The food programs, especially home delivered meals, show increases in the numbers of seniors in need.
- Budget cuts for the Senior Center are about \$16,000. Personnel cuts continue to make it necessary to use the Formula Grant to pay for salary. The Center Activities line item is proposed for FY09 to be cut by more than 50%.
- With a staff of only 3.5 members, the Center generates a tremendous amount through 236 volunteers who donate about \$78,000 worth of service per year.
- Reducing the budget as needs increase puts added strain on all staff and leads to burn out.

Dan and **Elsie** recommended that Nancy include in her report the new services provided to seniors – the Senior Health Services, the Counseling Center, and the Hampshire Elder Law Program for legal services.

Gerry acknowledged the importance of recognizing the consequences of reduced resources, and then opened the discussion to the philosophical issue of “why is it the Town’s responsibility to pay for this”? This is a question that is on the minds of people on the Finance Committee. To the Finance Committee #1 is police, fire and schools, then DPW, then General Services and government and IT and the finance department. At the bottom of the list is Human Services. Gerry does not agree with that but feels it has to be talked about.

A lengthy discussion followed.

Dan stressed the point that if the Town is attractive to elders, they will move here and bring tax money to the Town yet not put a strain on services.

Nancy feels that in a community, those who are able should support those who are not able. These seniors did support the Town schools and services during their earning years when they were able. Many of these people now live on limited incomes and can’t take care of themselves. They depend on the services that have been in Amherst for many years – programs for food, transportation, home health, counseling. It would be a disservice to these elders to say, “We can’t help you any more”.

Maura said it smacks of discrimination if we take care of the kids in the community and not the elders.

Stephanie hopes this type of discussion will happen at the community Budget Forum on Monday night. She reminded us that it is not simply a question of whether the community does or doesn’t want to do something. The community has a limited amount of resources. We don’t want to raise taxes too much, money from the state is decreasing, and expenses are increasing. We need to think about how to spread those resources. Within the COA we need to have discussions about priorities. Cuts will continue and we need to discuss and prioritize how those cuts will happen.

David expressed discomfort about the lack of distinction between the COA and the Senior Center. The charge for the COA is to be mainly an advocacy group, advising about the elderly population, not to micromanage the Senior Center. The subject is much broader – the relative need of the seniors and of the nature that need. Is the COA discharging part of its responsibility by not advocating outside of the Senior Center?

Stephanie expanded on David’s point. Not every town has a Senior Center but almost every town has a COA. In Amherst, serving seniors happens primarily through the Senior Center, so that is a logical COA focus. If we didn’t have a Senior Center, we would be looking at other ways of meeting the needs of seniors. How do we best consider our mission and the needs that we are meeting and how does that relate to the Senior Center? That is a discussion we need to have.

Dan thinks we need to pay more attention to recommendations as to what we do with the money that the Friends have raised. We should use the money with the understanding that if the Town can’t support us, members of the community are willing to. **Nancy** is concerned that the Friends Group is still in its infancy. Its members are not professional fundraisers and they need time to grow and find their voice. At this point we cannot raise enough to have an endowment. We are already tapping into the Friends money.

Elsie encouraged more frequent meetings for discussing priorities and the mission of the COA. It was decided to add such a discussion to the agenda of the next COA meeting.

The COA meeting adjourned at 10:55 AM.

The next meeting will be held on March 6, 2008 at 9:00 AM.

Respectfully submitted,
Rosemary Kofler, Secretary